

# ***Mason City Globe Gazette***

By CHARLOTTE EBY

DES MOINES -Gov. Tom Vilsack unveiled details of his "Great Places" initiative Monday, a program to help Iowans create innovative and culturally vibrant communities he hopes will stop the exodus of Iowa's college graduates to other states.

His plan, which would have to gain legislative approval, would spend \$8 million in new money to help communities develop attractions or amenities that add to the quality of life for residents.

"Great places mean different things to different people," Vilsack said. "We all know great places in Iowa. We have a responsibility to preserve them, capitalize on them, learn from them, help them become even greater."

If approved, local groups will be able to present an idea to a Great Places "coach" who will listen to the plan and put together a team of state agencies that can help connect them to state resources.

Community projects will have until July to apply for help through the Great Places project. A citizen advisory council appointed by Vilsack will select three pilot "Great Places" projects by October.

Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs Director Anita Walker said the program challenges Iowans to "recognize, celebrate and capitalize on what is good and wonderful about Iowa."

"It could be a downtown main street with a story. It could be an urban center or a neighborhood. These are great places, or potentially great places," Walker said.

Vilsack said the Great Places plan continues the success of Vision Iowa, a program which brought new tourism and cultural attractions to 170 communities, and led to \$2 billion in new investment.

"It has expanded dramatically the number of cultural and recreational opportunities in our state, and it has put us in a position to make a case to younger Iowans to stay here," Vilsack said.

The state also has launched a marketing campaign touting Iowa's quality of life with billboards and newspaper ads that aim to attract new residents and retain those already living here.

Vilsack said he's received positive reaction from ads that were shown on the jumbo screen at the state high school basketball tournaments in Des Moines in recent weeks.

"People were very interested and excited to see that we were actually aggressively promoting the state, particularly to our young people," Vilsack said.

## **Editorial:**

Summary: State proposal could help increase tourism and quality-of-life potential for existing places, and could also spark consideration for exciting new ideas. State proposal could help increase tourism and quality-of-life potential for existing places, and could also spark consideration for exciting new ideas.

Think of some of your favorite places in North Iowa. What makes them special?

Perhaps it is the eclectic aura that a place conveys, or maybe an energetic, techno-oriented environment. A favorite recreation area may be special because of its natural beauty or the sense of solitude it affords - or both. Maybe one of your favorite places is a neighborhood of free-thinkers, musicians and poets. OK, maybe not, but maybe there's potential for one.

In any case, special places are much more than buildings or natural areas. They're special because of the sensations they afford. The combined elements - sights, sounds, people, etc. - contribute to a feeling of belonging or peace or recreation

or musical enlightenment or some other special sensation that just makes you want to spend more time there.

The state of Iowa wants to know where our great places are, and to help you and others develop them into hot spots for others - especially young people - to enjoy.

Under the new "Great Places" initiative outlined this week, teams of state employees will work with local groups to develop the places into tourist destinations/great places to live.

"We all know great places in Iowa," Gov. Tom Vilsack said in announcing the program. If approved by lawmakers, \$8 million would be available to help communities develop attractions or amenities that add to the quality of life.

"We're really excited about this initiative. The phone has been ringing off the hook," said Anita Walker, director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs.

Instead of having to wade through state bureaucracy to develop great places, those with ideas would work with teams of state employees.

In its first year, three pilot projects will be chosen, Walker said, based on a screening process that gives preference to projects with broad community support, quantifiable results and sustainability.

The Great Places process begins with forums around the state. The first will be May 17 in Clear Lake.

Now, Iowans aren't known as a boastful people, but we usually know a good thing when we see it, and can see potential in what we have.

Just a moment's thought brings to mind several great places - East Park; downtown Mason City with The Music Man Square, Central Park and Southbridge Mall; Clear Lake.

With more community commitment and perhaps a little help from the state, we can make these and other parts of North Iowa even greater places for folks to enjoy.

It will be interesting to see what Great Places projects local folks propose. Don't be shy.